

An Experience of Enlightenment

Flora Courtois



A Quest Miniature

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In youthful days
You had doubt about this life

No teacher found
And went alone

At the moment of glancing at the desk
The doubt disappeared, the mind in peace

You lost your way and now
The way has opened in all directions.

Written for the author
by Hakuun Yasutani Roshi

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PREFACE

HUSTON SMITH

TO CONTEMPORARY epistemologists who study how we know, the peoples of the past seem presumptuous in what they thought they knew, for they spoke of seeing into their own true nature or catching glimpses of ultimate reality. It would be a mistake, though, to think that we are more humble than they, for though they often seem arrogant in what they thought they could know, we are fully as arrogant about what we feel certain the human mind cannot know. "Virtually every contemporary philo-

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sophical and theological methodology takes as its starting point how well we know how little we know," the current issue of an academic journal tells us.¹ Kant, with his *Prolegomena to any Future Metaphysics*, set the tone for this arrogant humility. Because the categories of understanding apply only to the impressions that come to us from the sensible world, he argued, we are debarred from "insight into supersensible objects. The minimum of knowledge must suffice."²

It is against this background that accounts like this one by Flora Courtois assume their importance. They lift the lid that Kant would have us believe the human mind is subject to. It is important to see that Kant in no wise proved that when "the universe changed on its axis" for our author, as she reports on

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page 43, it could not have disclosed deeper regions than her senses were privy to. He merely argued that such direct access to the noumenal world, the world that underlies the phenomenal world of appearances, is impossible. His arguments for that denial are now pretty much discredited—there are few card-carrying Kantians around anymore—but social and historical forces, chief among them the West's continuing materialism, have kept his skeptical conclusion in place. In this respect, "Fidelity to Kant is the touchstone of our period," as James Cutsinger reports.³ As another religious scholar puts it: "It seems a matter of consensus that human knowledge and experience are restricted to the human and sensible world."⁴

Which, to repeat, is why testaments, like this one in hand, that challenge that

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demeaning claim are so important for our time. *The Chronicle of Higher Education* tells us that "if anything characterizes 'modernity' it is loss of faith in transcendence, in a reality that encompasses but surpasses our quotidian affairs."⁵ That faith cannot be restored by arguments, for the most that arguments can show is that absence of evidence is not evidence of absence; clouds that hide the sun do not show that the sun does not exist. To show that the sun does exist, sightings are needed, and here in hand is a report of a sighting that is totally convincing. As Yasutani Roshi points out in his validating foreword, it has the ring of complete authenticity. Naturally it does not take the place of seeing for one's self; nothing in Zen or any of the other wisdom traditions encourages us to settle for menus rather

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than meals. The account does, though, extend encouragement to all who are walking the pilgrim's path or considering doing so. For this assistance, bowing deeply with palms pressed together in gassho, we can be profoundly grateful to the author of this compelling account.

1. *Sciences Religieuses/Studies in Religion*, 14/2 (Spring 1985), p. 149.
2. Immanuel Kant, *Religion within the Limits of Reason Alone* (New York: Harper & Row, 1960), 142n.
3. *Sciences Religieuses*, p. 152.
4. William van der Marek, "Fundamental Theology: A Bibliographical and Critical Survey," *Religious Studies Review* * (1982), p. 246.
5. January 9, 1978, p. 18.

MEETING FLORA

COURTOIS

HAKUUN YASUTANI



I

IN THE SUMMER of 1968, along with Soen Nakagawa Roshi and several other persons, I made a visit to the Zen Mountain Center at Tassajara Hot Springs, California. Located deep in the mountain wilderness of central California, this zendo is an approximately eight-hour drive northwest from Los Angeles and a four-hour drive south from San Francisco.

Leaving the Los Angeles zendo at 9 a.m. on July 9th and pausing to rest a couple of times, our party arrived at Tassajara a little past six in the evening. During the last two hours of our drive, the car climbed a narrow precipitous and sharply curving mountain road,

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through forest so deep it was difficult to imagine anyone's ever having walked there. From time to time, along the road we caught glimpses of deer and squirrels. In the sky far above hawks drifted in seemingly motionless circles.

From its highest point at a 5,000-foot level the road then descended down to the 400- or 500-foot level into the secluded Tassajara valley with its natural hot springs, waterfalls and rushing streams, old trees and stone buildings.

Here, in this valley, Shunryu Suzuki Roshi, who came to San Francisco from Japan more than ten years ago in order to give guidance in Zen, with the help of his American students and the support of other understanding donors, has established the first Zen Mountain Retreat in America. Even now the work of building up this mountain center con-

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tinues. Altogether, the property including hot springs, valley and surrounding mountain terrain consists of 120 acres. This mountain temple is called *Zenshinji*.

Prior to this trip, Flora Courtois had been for some time a member of the Los Angeles Zen Center, of which Reverend Maezumi is in charge, and had been practicing Zazen regularly. It was she who offered us the transportation and who drove her car to take us to Tassajara and back to Los Angeles. Because of her kindness we were able to visit Tassajara without any difficulties, even to enjoy a bath soaking ourselves in the hot springs.

Shortly after returning from Tassajara to Los Angeles, accompanied by Nakagawa Roshi, I went to New York for the opening dedication ceremonies of the New York zendo, following which

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Nakagawa Roshi left for Israel and I returned to Los Angeles. A few days later Mrs. Courtois telephoned to ask if she might come to relate to me a personal experience.

II

It was on a Tuesday morning at 10 o'clock on July 16th that she came to the Center and I listened to her talk for well over an hour through the interpretation of Maezumi Sensei. Although not so fully described as in this book, what she told me was essentially the same.

She began with a description of her growing sense of doubt concerning all things as a young girl. She went on to tell how she began to confront the ques-

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tion, "What is the ultimate reality?" while attending college, of her search for a solution through reading the works of many philosophers, of personal visits in quest of help to several priests and professors, of how all this was in vain and how she was finally referred to the college psychiatrist. But everywhere she searched so little serious attention or understanding was given to her problem that she began to feel isolated from the rest of the college community and fell into a vortex of endless searching thought. Several vision-like experiences occurred to her.

These experiences of her youthful life extended over a period of several years until at last one day, sitting alone in her bedroom on the edge of her bed, absent-mindedly gazing at a nearby desk, she

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experienced an extraordinary event which resolved all her doubt and filled her with inexpressible joy and delight.

III

This was the turning point. As her awareness deepened over the succeeding months, effortlessly all her problems and uncertainties were resolved and her entire attitude toward life underwent a radical change. Even her physical condition improved and she rapidly gained needed weight.

However, when she tried to relate what she described as her experience of Open Vision to her professors at college or to the college psychiatrist she met such a blank lack of interest and understanding that she finally concluded

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there was no one to whom she could try to describe this experience with any hope of recognition or appreciation. She then resolved never to speak of it again until she was confident such a person had been found.

Since that time, over twenty-five years ago until this morning of July 16th, she had not spoken of it again. I learned that she had continued her life first as a student, later as a psychologist and writer as well as a useful person in her community, and all along at the same time as a busy housewife and mother.

Above is the briefest summary of our original talk. Although more than twenty-five years had intervened, it was obvious she vividly recalled every moment. Throughout her talk I carefully watched and observed her; her facial expression was very calm, with tender-

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ness but without harshness; my total impression was of an individual quite natural and serene.

Listening to her talk, I instinctively felt that to test her experience was unnecessary. That experience she had over twenty-five years ago was still vitally alive today. Immediately I verified that the experience was a very clear kensho!¹ At the same time I recommended to her that she practice *Shikan Taza*² with more diligence. I pointed out that the further one penetrates into the ocean of *Buddha-Dharma* the more one deepens one's realization. So I repeatedly emphasized to her the importance of renewing her

¹Literally, seeing into one's own nature: Enlightenment, satori.

²Zen practice without supportive devices such as breath counting, characterized by intense, non-discursive awareness.

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determination to practice further because our Buddha nature has the great function by which illumination is deepened endlessly through practice.

IV

Although utterly unaware of what Buddhism or Zen is, Flora Courtois attained enlightenment by herself through her unrelenting struggle with the question, "What is Reality?" This is called having no teacher, enlightenment by oneself alone which is the *same sort of satori that Shakyamuni Buddha* attained as he saw the dawn star on December 8th.

The true enlightenment of Buddhism is to realize the Original Self. It is common to all true enlightenment regard-

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less of race or country or time. Such enlightenment is not at all exclusive to a particular religion. It is quite certain that everyone may attain kensho as Mrs. Courtois did if only each would pursue wholeheartedly this search for the Original Self. However, due to inadequate faith and effort few attain such kensho.

Throughout the world there must be others who, like Flora Courtois, attain kensho alone. Unfortunately, it is very difficult for them to meet a qualified teacher who can examine such so-called kensho experiences and verify whether these are genuine or not, or deep or shallow. Consequently a true experience is often buried and unrevealed.

Further, kensho is only the first discovery of the original Self, that is, only a beginning. To deepen and clarify it, to establish its full function in everyday

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life, requires never-ending practice. Again, it is even more difficult to meet a teacher able to guide one along this post-kensho path. Therefore, among these rare kensho flowers that bloom alone in the world many must die without bearing ripened fruit.

I sincerely hope that more persons will appear on this earth who will so resolutely plunge into themselves as to realize the Original true Self. Fortunately Zen, which has been directly and accurately transmitted from the Honored One, Shakyamuni Buddha, to this day in Japan, in recent years has travelled west to take root in American soil.

To all those involved both in Japan and America I urge that you be diligent in your practice so that you may penetrate to clear kensho and afterwards ever deepen your enlightenment.

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With firm confidence I recommend this practice of Zen, not only so that each of you will gain peace and wisdom, but also so that peace and reconciliation for all mankind will follow as a natural sequence.

I SEARCH



*For Zen Master Hakuun Yasutani Roshi
to whom this was related in full for the
first time and. who requested that it be
written down.*

WHEN AND WHERE does this story begin? It is difficult to say. Even now I remember the feeling as a small child that all things about me, the people, the animals, trees and flowers, my dolls, my plate and spoon, all participated with me in one vivid reality. It was a family joke that I had to be spoken to several times to get my attention, so absorbed did I often become in listening and watching, in play with my dolls and later on, in reading. Often I felt in magic communion with other living things. Some of my earliest memories are of rescuing drowning insects from a small pond, of escorting small spiders from the house so they would not be killed, of lying on my stomach in a neighboring field, raptly absorbed in the busy life of the tiny creatures under the giant grass blades.

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Despite these empathic experiences of early childhood, by the time I was thirteen or fourteen years old I had become a self-centered, self-conscious girl. It was as if I'd lost track of who I was. I day-dreamed a good deal about being popular among many friends; in actuality I was nervous and isolated, not knowing how to be comfortable with young people my age and anxiously searching for some role to play in life. At times, what I felt to be my inner voice seemed to be trying to draw me away from the busy life and activities of my friends. It was as if I were of two minds and this sometimes left me confused and unable to act at all. Probably these were normal adolescent feelings intensified by the pressures of being ahead of my age and usual grade in school.

When I was sixteen, minor surgery

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had to be performed. An ether cone was placed over my face and as I breathed in deeply, a great whirling spiral of light approached from an enormous distance and at great speed. At the same time, a voice of unmistakable authority seemed to say that when the center of the spiral reached me I would "understand all things." Just as the center reached me I blacked out, but after recovering there remained an unforgettable conviction that what I had heard and seen was in some inexplicable way the deepest truth.

Sometime during my 17th year, quietly, unobtrusively, a process began which was to build up over a period of several years until it literally took over my life. This began with a growing sense of doubt which spread until it encompassed everything I'd been taught

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and everything I knew. In the house where we were living there was a number of books of maxims written by the great persons of many ages. I read these, collecting favorite sayings in a scrapbook which I still have. However, I began to think it strange that with all the books of advice in the world, all the laws and admonitions from parents, teachers, priests and other elders, there was still nothing to assure me of living fully in any given moment, since every moment was unique. How did one fit the rule to reality when by the time one found the right rule the moment was gone?

In a vague, groping way I now began to search for some single law, some one basic Reality so primary that it permeated all else. I had been brought up as a Catholic. Each Sunday I dutifully

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attended Mass with neither much understanding nor any real sense of participation. I was an onlooker and I felt ashamed of this. The problem, I concluded, must lie in the fact that I didn't understand my religion. So shortly thereafter I made my way to the study of the parish priest, where, sitting on the edge of my chair, I asked him to explain these matters to me. He went over the various doctrines of the church, of the trinity and the virgin birth, of salvation and redemption to make sure I knew them. I felt intensely disappointed that he didn't seem to come to the core of the matter. He then sent me home with three or four books to read further on doctrine. Dutifully I read them all only to finish with more questions and doubts than ever. I clearly remember thinking: "Surely there must be *some-*

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thing that applies even to the everyday tasks of life, even to how I wash the dishes at night. But how do I *find* it?"

If not in church, I decided, then certainly back in school, in the works of the great philosophers, the answers would come. At this time I had finished one year of college and then had to stay at home a year because of the economic depression. Now through a tremendous effort I returned to the University of Michigan in Ann Arbor, borrowing the tuition, arranging to help with the housework and care of children in a home about three miles from the campus in return for my room and board and at the same time taking a nearly full class load. This busy schedule of home work and class work was all on the surface, however, because underneath, walking back and forth to campus, do-

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ing my chores, I became increasingly preoccupied with pursuing my doubts to their limits. During the following year or more, with a desperate intensity, I read in the works of most of the leading Western philosophers from Plato to Spinoza, Hume, Berkeley, and on to Kant, Hegel, Schopenhauer, Nietzsche, Bradley, Kierkegaard, Bergson, Wittgenstein, and others. Fascinating as much of it was, it all seemed fragmented and one-sided. Nothing satisfied me, nothing went to the root of my need. I seemed to be moving in endless theoretical and verbal circles, chasing a mirage of ultimate finality. At times I had periods of bleak despair, feeling my quest was hopeless.

Then one day, in a class in psychology, the instructor made a casual remark to the effect that the world as we

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saw it was "simply a projection of neural activity in the visual centers of the brain." I walked out of the class and along the street, thunderstruck, saying over and over to myself, "All I know, the whole world, even the universe, is myself! The answer somehow lies in myself." I was filled with an extraordinary sense of exhilaration with this realization.

Shortly after this, another incident occurred which made a deep impression on me. Standing at the kitchen window one day, and looking out at where a path wound under some maple trees, I suddenly saw the scene with a freshness and clarity that I'd never seen before. Simultaneously, as though for the first time, I fully realized I was not only on the earth but of it, an intimate part and product of it. It was as if a door had

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briefly opened. I stood there transfixed. I remember thinking: "Distant places on the map such as Tibet and North Africa are extensions of right here, all interrelated!" It was as if for a long time I had been reading books on how to swim; now, for a moment, I had plunged into real water.

After these two incidents, I ceased to search for an answer in reading and became intensely interested in exploring everyday experience. The very nature of sensation itself absorbed my attention. I became increasingly aware of sights, sounds, touch and smell impressions, feelings, all for their own sakes, and the more observant I became, the more endless the vistas which seemed to open. "What is more immediate than sensation?" I asked myself. "Surely reality must somehow permeate imme-

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diate sensation. Yet each sense is so limited, so partial and incomplete. How does one sense Reality whole, all at once? Is that impossible?"

Like a strong undertow pulling me down and away from the routine surface of life, my inner quest absorbed more and more of my time. I began to stay alone in my room for long periods, just sitting, observing, struggling inwardly for some direct contact. "If there is a basic Reality that is common to everything," I thought, "it must be *within* my experience too, as well as in everything and everybody else's. Surely I can grasp it immediately and at first hand. Any other way would be only second hand and would not be *it* at all. But how could I get at it, how know it first hand?" I became preoccupied with the most elementary processes of get-

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ting myself reoriented to the earth and to the people and things around me. It's difficult to describe this period and the rather eerie feelings that pervaded this groping. It was as if I had been living in a world of ideas; now, having lost confidence in these and having let go of them I had to start all over again, to look at everything, feel it, touch it, sense it again almost as an infant does, to realize what experience was truly like.

Again and again I returned to considering the sense of sight. It seemed to me that *how* one saw the world around one, not *what* one saw but *how*, was the crux of the problem. Somewhere in a psychology textbook, perhaps in a chapter on gestalt psychology, I had read a discussion of figure and ground perception. I now noticed that while the focus of sight moved from figure to figure, the

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nature of the ground largely determined the nature of the figure. But what and where was the basic ground for all perception? Was it just another, but larger, figure with a fixed boundary? I seemed able neither to penetrate to its nature nor to find its limits.

It came to me that I had always thought of the center of myself as in my head and the rest of my body as somehow incidental. My head was so full of activity it was almost as if it were disconnected from the rest of me. Just before falling asleep sometimes I would have the illusion of having an enormous head. I thought of the various parts of my body in sequence. It seemed to me there was something all wrong with this. If one were a whole and single human being, surely there must be some way to realize oneself all at once,

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to think with one's feet as well as with one's head.

My pursuit of this elusive ground of all things perceived began now to bring to my attention a welter of forgotten memories and feelings. Over many hours I reviewed past experiences with parents, relatives and friends, realizing gradually that this web of memories made an ever-shifting pattern, never quite the same from moment to moment. where was the changelessness in change I sought here?

Now it was as if I were being pulled down into the vortex of a maelstrom within me, pulling me ever further down and away from everyday life and involving me in an all-consuming life or death struggle. Although I never completely lost touch with other people around me I began to wonder if I would

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ever be in close communication with other human beings again. Their lives and daily preoccupations seemed so remote from mine. The simplest tasks distracted me and took an excessive amount of time. I remember standing over an ironing board and concentrating so intently on the question: What is the ground of everyday reality? that it took me all afternoon to do a small ironing. That was certainly no way to hold a job.

I remembered a remark of Nietzsche's that it was dangerous for any one to go too far alone. This frightened me but I could not give up now. I felt compelled to go on no matter what the outcome.

Now I made two urgent attempts to find someone who could understand and help. One Sunday morning I went back to Mass, which I had no longer been attending, at the campus chapel.

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It was a clear, cold day and the chapel was jammed with other young people dressed in their best clothes. The priest was a popular, hearty young man who kept the social life of the parish churning. The whole ritual affair appeared to me, in my frame of mind, as a highly mannered charade. After listening to his sermon, the possibility of ever communicating my acute concern to this man seemed remote. Perhaps I did him an injustice but I never went back.

I next paid a visit to a philosophy professor whom I'd heard was a kind and understanding man. When I told him of my intense interest in discovering the nature of Reality he suggested I take a course in epistemology the following term. I left his office feeling utterly forsaken, thinking, "I don't want another course. What I want is *the thing itself!*"

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I began to despair of ever communicating this to anyone.

About this time, when in my room alone, I began to have occasional visions. These were not hallucinations nor were they dreams. They were more like the visions one sometimes sees just before sleep or eidetic images. They were astoundingly clear. In one of them a scene appeared as from an incalculably remote and primitive time. I seemed to be a member of a small family of cave dwellers. There was a darkness, a gloomy dankness about our lives and surroundings. In our cave we had found a place of security and protection from what I sensed to be a hostile outside world. Gradually, however, we found within ourselves the courage as a family to venture forth together to seek a brighter, more open place. Now we

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found ourselves on a great, open, light plain which stretched in all directions and where the horizons seemed to beckon to us with untold possibilities. To my surprise and horror, the others in my family found this threatening and decided to retreat to life in the cave again. I felt profoundly convinced that this represented a critical decision, a fork in the life of the family and indeed of the whole human race. The challenge was of the next important step upward. I now knew that the choice I had to make was whether to remain within the safe fold of the group or to continue on, leaving most of mankind behind. If I went on, henceforth I would go alone.

After this, my sense of aloneness deepened still further. In another vision I found myself standing in a familiar room where apparently I had already

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spent many years. The place had an abstract, geometric quality, squared off in flat, two-dimensional planes as in certain modern stage sets. I seemed to spend a great deal of my time at a desk facing a wall, manipulating assorted, colored blocks. Without actually seeing them, I also knew that all around me in the same building, above and below and up and down long hallways there were other persons in other and similar cubistic rooms, busy day and night with the same kind of abstract manipulations. Once in a while we came out of our rooms and met in the hallways to chat a while before returning to our separated cubicles. One day, without knowing why or how, I turned completely around and there to my surprise was a long, open window opening directly on-

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to a breathtaking vista. It had apparently been there all along.

Stepping outside, in wonder I found myself again in an airy, light scene where there was a mountain-fresh stream winding beneath shade trees, where the colors were deep and translucent; everything seemed alive and dancing and the horizons and the firmament extended to infinity in all directions. Along with everything else I seemed to dance in ecstasy. Then, standing still and looking back at the building, I thought sadly of the people there, each in his cubicle, unaware of the wondrous universe all about, so easily accessible if only they would turn around and look. I felt I must return to communicate this message to them.

To my dismay, on re-entering the

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building I found I had no words for it. Nothing I did could alert the attention of these others running up and down the halls or working furiously in their walled-off rooms.

It is hard to adequately describe the depth of conviction, the sense of mysterious truth these visions carried with them. A conviction grew in me that mankind had become over-civilized and degenerate, that just as in my visions, somewhere on the evolutionary path a wrong fork had been taken where men had retreated from a critical challenge to return to the living source, walling themselves off and manipulating their constricted environments until they had become effete, intellectual creatures out of communion with the rest of nature. I began to seriously consider the possibility that I might have to go into the

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woods to live a more wholesome life alone with the animals (at the same time hoping that a few human beings with similar feelings might eventually join me there!).

I now developed messianic feelings about having to write down these "truths" and I began to write a long paper, sitting up far into the night for several nights. The general theme of the paper was that the human race was lost and could save itself only by returning to its roots in nature. When it was finished, I telephoned Dr. DeWitt Parker,³ my philosophy professor, and persuaded him to let me bring the paper

³Dr. DeWitt Henry Parker (1885-1949) was a distinguished American philosopher whose works on metaphysics and aesthetics are reviewed in *Masterpieces of World Philosophy* published by Harper and Row.

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to his house that very evening. It was a bitter winter night with snow waist deep, so in my urgency I called a taxi, a wild extravagance for me then. I had a swollen lip from a bad cold sore and I must have been a strange, dishevelled, half-mad sight as I stood on Dr. Parker's doorstep, manuscript clutched in my hand. Sitting at one end of his pleasant living room, Dr. Parker patiently read through the entire paper while I sat nearby anxiously waiting. When he had finished he told me in a kindly manner that the paper made him think of Rousseau. Then, as he was showing me to the door, he gently suggested that it might be wise for me to have a little talk with the University psychiatrist. As I returned to my room that night, I felt my last hope of ever being understood had vanished.

Two days later, as I passed a corner

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drug store I went in and bought a large bottle of sleeping pills (for which no prescription was apparently then required in Michigan) thinking that if my isolation from the rest of humanity became any deeper I might take them. That evening, looking at my face in the bathroom mirror, I looked quite unreal to myself. Yet what I was discovering seemed more real than the everyday life around me. How strange it all was.

Fortunately, two incidents soon occurred. My seat in a class in European history was in the front row center directly in front of the lecturer, so that as he leaned over his lectern he looked directly down at me. This term the lecturer happened to be a young, visiting professor from Oxford, very British, very starchy. Sitting in my seat in class one midwinter morning, gazing straight ahead, I suddenly became aware of

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space in an extraordinary manner; that is, I was equally aware of it behind me, underneath, above, all around and in fact, it seemed to be all through me. This so astounded me that I held my eyes wide open and my breath still for fear of losing this incredible experience. This was too much for the visiting Britisher who brought his lecture to a full stop, leaned over the lectern, and asked me if something he had said had unduly surprised me. I blinked, breathed, replied, "No, sir," and returned to history. But now I knew something extraordinary was very close and I felt exhilarated and hopeful.

Also, apparently by now a number of people were becoming concerned about my unusual behavior and someone had made a telephone call. One evening there was a knock on my bedroom door

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and Dr. Belt a woman doctor from the University student health service, paid me a visit. After a short talk she persuaded me that a few days' rest in the infirmary would be a sound idea so I packed a few things and went along there with her. Next morning found me in the office of the University psychiatrist, Dr. Theophile Rafael. Dr. Rafael asked me a number of questions about my life at home and in school and I talked to him quite freely about my parents and my school life. We never once discussed my deeper and more urgent concerns but I did tell him of my vision of the open window. He had a most understanding manner of nodding with his head to one side, his forefinger resting alongside his nose. I realize now he probably interpreted this account of mine from a Freudian point of view. At

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the time all I felt was a profound relief at being back in contact with at least one seemingly understanding member of the human race. I saw Dr. Rafael only once or twice more in his office. He and his assistant decided I had been working too hard and eating too little. These kind people managed to tap some University fund which enabled me to move to a rooming house nearer campus, and for a few, wonderfully free months I simply went to one of the college cafeterias where all my meals were paid for. They also requested that I drop in at intervals and report how things were going. This I gladly did.

It was now early spring. After my stay of four or five days in the infirmary, I moved into my new room and returned to my underground quest with renewed vigor. Sitting on a bus one day, I con-

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centrated intently on trying to recapture that awareness of open, empty space in all directions until I suddenly realized several people sitting opposite were staring at me in some alarm.

I finally decided that Reality must be unlike any preconceived idea I might have of it and reached a point of just waiting and letting be. For long periods I simply sat, saying inwardly "No, not this" as if waiting, for what I knew not.

Sometime in April, Easter vacation arrived and I went home to Detroit to spend a week with my parents. There, about three days later, alone in my room, sitting quietly on the edge of my bed and gazing at a small desk, not thinking of anything at all, in a moment too short to measure, the universe changed on its axis and my search was over.

II

ARRIVAL



THE SMALL, PALE GREEN desk at which I'd been so thoughtlessly gazing had totally and radically changed. It appeared now with a clarity, a depth of three-dimensionality, a freshness I had never imagined possible. At the same time, in a way that is utterly indescribable, all my questions and doubts were gone as effortlessly as chaff in the wind. I knew everything and all at once, yet not in the sense that I had ever known anything before.

All things were the same in my little bedroom yet totally changed. Still sitting in wonder on the edge of my narrow bed, one of the first things I realized was that the focus of my sight seemed to have changed; it had sharpened to an infinitely small point which moved ceaselessly in paths totally free of the old accustomed ones, as if flowing from a new source.

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What on earth had happened? So released from all tension, so ecstatically light did I feel, I seemed to float down the hall to the bathroom to look at my face in the mottled mirror over the sink. The pupils of my eyes were dark, dilated and brimming with mirth. With a wondrous relief, I began to laugh as I'd never laughed before, from the soles of my feet upward.

Within a few days I had returned to Ann Arbor, and there over a period of many months there took place a ripening, a deepening and unfolding of this experience which filled me with wonder and gratitude at every moment. The foundations had fallen from my world. I had plunged into a numinous openness which had obliterated all fixed distinctions including that of *within* and *without*. A Presence had absorbed the

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universe including myself, and to this I surrendered in absolute confidence. Often, without any particular direction in mind, I found myself outside running along the street in joyous abandon. Sometimes when alone I simply danced as freely as I did as a child. The whole world seemed to have reversed itself, to have turned outside in. Activity flowed simply and effortlessly, and to my amazement, seemingly without thought. Instead of following my old sequence of learning, thinking, planning, then acting, action had taken precedence and whatever was learned was surprisingly incidental. Yet nothing ever seemed to go out of bounds; there was no alternation between self-control and letting go but rather a perfect rightness and spontaneity to all this flowing activity.

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This new kind of knowing was so pure and unadorned, so delicate, that nothing in the language of my past could express it. Neither sense nor feeling nor imagination contained it yet all were contained in it. In some indefinable way I knew with absolute certainty the changeless unity and harmony in change of the universe and the inseparability of all seeming opposites.

It was as if, before all this occurred, "I" had been a fixed point inside my head looking out at a world out there, a separate and comparatively flat world. The periphery of awareness had now come to light, yet neither fixed periphery nor center existed as such. A paradoxical quality seemed to permeate all existence. Feeling myself centered as never before, at the same time I knew the whole universe to be centered at

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every point. Having plunged to the center of emptiness, having lost all purposefulness in the old sense, I had never felt so one-pointed, so dear and decisive. Freed from separateness, feeling one with the universe, everything including myself had become at once unique and equal. If God was the word for this Presence in which I was absorbed then everything was either holy or nothing; no distinction was possible. All was meaningful, complete as it was, each bird, bud, midge, mole, atom, crystal, of total importance in itself. As in the notes of a great symphony, nothing was large or small, nothing of more or less importance to the whole. I now saw that wholeness and holiness are one.

Passing the campus chapel, I remembered how I had been taught in church

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to think of myself as here on earth and of God as above and out there, to aspire to heaven as in some future time and place, to emulate the lives of others. How tragic it seemed that anyone should be distracted in this way from a first-hand knowledge of Reality. My entire education had taught me only to stand in the light. Nothing had been added, but only the delusions of this education removed. I knew now that eternity is here always, that there is no higher, no deeper, no separate past or future time or place. How could love be other than this all-encompassing Oneness to which we can do nothing but open ourselves?

I felt that I was done forever with all seeking, all philosophic and religious doctrines, all fear of dying or concern for the future, all need for authority

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other than this. If I could continue in this state of Open Vision I felt certain that whatever happened, everything would be right just as it was.

Years before I had sought a rule that would apply to everything I did, even to washing dishes. Now I simply washed the dishes. In the most simple of bodily feelings and the most ordinary of daily tasks, living was transformed. I had never felt so completely whole and in one piece or enjoyed my bodily feelings so much. Breathing had changed, had become deeper, more rhythmical. Hands, eyes, voice, all seemed quieter, more relaxed. With seemingly boundless energy every task became effortless and light. Running exuberantly home from classes or work, bounding up two flights of stairs to my third-floor rooming house room, I would fall soundly

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asleep for a quick, day-time catnap, then waken shortly feeling wonderfully refreshed. With spontaneous gusto, I found myself eating lightly whenever hungry (gaining ten much-needed pounds in a few months). Even my handwriting changed.

As for my relations with others, another person now filled my shoes. Laughter and delight seemed to fill my life. Somehow I had become more human, more ordinary, more friendly and at ease with all kinds of people. Apparently I appeared happy and smiling too, for strangers often came up and spoke to me.

I had no idea what I could have done to have deserved these miraculous changes but I felt the most inexpressible gratitude for them. They had enriched my life beyond compare. Literally

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everything had become interesting. As for my school work, it improved in some areas and declined in others. I was less concerned with meeting conventional demands.

But of all the changes that had occurred, the one that seemed to me in some mysterious way to be the key to everything else was the change in vision. It was as if some inner eye, some ancient center of awareness, which extended equally and at once in all directions without limit and which had been there all along had been restored. This inner vision seemed to be anchored in infinity in a way that was detached from immediate sight and yet at the same time had a profound effect on sight. Walking along the street I was aware of the street flowing past and beneath me, the trees or buildings moving past all

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around and the sky moving above as if I were immersed in one flowing whole. A child-like *unknowing* pervaded perception. The immediate world had acquired a new depth and clarity of color and form, an unalloyed freshness and unexpectedness. Rooted in the present, every moment opened to eternity. Along with this, there was a sharp single-pointedness to the focus of attention which caused me to feel that I was looking straight and deeply into whatever entered my attention. Yet paradoxically I felt blind. This is difficult to describe. It was as if my attention were now rooted in some deeper center so that my everyday sight, my eyes, released from their former tension to reach out and see the world outside, were now as free as if they had been blanked out, eliminated altogether.

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Another incidental change I noticed was that no matter in what direction I looked, no shadow of my nose or face ever appeared in the clear field of sight as apparently it had occasionally done before. I also found other people's eyes fascinating, as well as those of animals, looking into them as if into my own. This change of vision was so impressive that I went to the University Medical School library and searched in the card files under the headings of vision, sight, and eyes trying to find some reference to this new kind of vision. There was nothing, not a clue. Still I remained convinced that this change in vision was somehow basic to all the other transforming changes.

What I called *Open Vision* not only awakened appreciation for the inexhaustible delights of everyday living,

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the smell of smoking damp leaves, the taste of fresh Michigan apple, the sounds of the thrush in the early morning. It had also made me more aware of the sufferings of others, so much of it self-inflicted. Knowing that it was perhaps impossible, I still longed to tell others something that would help open their vision as mine had been. My first attempt was with my friend Suzanne, a piano student. To her I said something like this: "Sue, there is a way to know the universe and yourself as one whole, all at once. If you can do that you won't have to strain so to learn. It will come naturally." We talked frequently until I realized I was not really communicating this to her at all. Another day, near the University health service, I ran into my old friend the psychiatrist, Dr. Rafael. "How are you getting along?"

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he said. "Sometime if you'd have time," I said, "I'd like to come in and tell you about a wonderful thing that's happened to my vision." He gave me a long, quizzical look. "Well," he said, "I wouldn't worry about my vision if I were you. You're looking awfully well." And off he went.

About this time, a paper was required of me in a general science class. My background in any physical science was almost non-existent at that time but I recklessly decided to try to put down on paper, in the objective language of science, what I felt I had discovered through changed vision. The paper was titled "One Law." It was another unsuccessful attempt. My professor commented that he had no idea about what I was talking.

How inadequate words were to even

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suggest this experience to anyone else. What seemed to me the most marvelous and significant of experiences seemed hardly of passing interest to others.

I came to feel that to talk about this personal experience was to expose to shallow interpretation and disrespect what was most worthy of respect. I decided then never to speak of it again until I was confident it would be appreciated.

Autumn came to Ann Arbor, bringing with it a carnival of colors and sparkling air. Wandering in the fields and along wooded paths, sometimes lying on a grassy bank looking up at the stars in the evening, I felt completely at home. In an indefinable way, I felt the presence of others who understood and I felt confident that so long as I lived with Open Vision everything else would

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somehow be right and just as it had always been intended.

So it came about that the changes described here, so strange and incredible at first, gradually came to seem quite natural.

III

LOSS AND RETURN



FOR THE NEXT YEAR-and-a-half or two I lived each day with joyful awareness. It never occurred to me to think of myself as in any way enlightened. Then still, I had never heard such terms as *enlightenment*, *satori* or *religious experience*. If I had heard of Buddhism at all it was simply as an obscure oriental religion.

By now, I had married and was working in Detroit. During this time I read a book entitled *The Bates Method of Sight Without Glasses*.⁴ The author, Dr. Bates, impressed me as having an unusual point of view about seeing. I was struck by his frequent use of the term "central fixation" and wondered if by any

⁴Aldous Huxley later became interested in the Bates method and wrote a book about it: *The Art of Seeing*, Harper & Row, 1942.

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chance he might understand about Open Vision. With a little investigation, I discovered that Dr. Bates was deceased but that his widow lived and carried on his work in New York City. I resolved to find a way to go there to talk to her. After saving up for many months, I made the trip to New York where I paid a visit to Mrs. Bates. She was a kind, friendly person and we had a most pleasant visit but this experience taught me that she was talking about local sight while I was struggling to express an entirely different dimension of vision.

Back again in Detroit, I was becoming ever more dissatisfied with my job as a professional writer in the business world. Quite naively, I decided that I might find the way to deepen my own experience and also find a way to bring it to others, which I longed to do, by be-

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coming a psychologist. I had long since concluded that organized religion offered me no help in this way. Once again I returned to study at the University, now changing my major from English literature to psychology.

Here one day, seemingly by accident, I picked up a copy of William James's *Varieties of Religious Experience* and with a shock of recognition read for the first time descriptions of the kind of experience I had had. This led me directly to the literature of the Orient. When I read the *Tao Te Ching* and soon after, my first Buddhist sutra, tears filled my eyes. They struck such a familiar chord. The sutras seemed to speak with unveiled clarity. Mandalas fascinated me. I wondered if anyone living had had such an experience as mine or if mine were some kind of anachronism.

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After we had moved to California, I continued my exploration of oriental literature, reading my first book on Zen, discovering the works of such western mystics as Meister Eckhart, John of the Cross, William Blake, and the author of *The Cloud of Unknowing*. With Eckhart and Blake I felt an especial affinity. The term *mystical* seemed to me to be a misnomer for these authors, expressing as they did so deep a grasp of Reality.

In about 1950, I took a course in comparative religion from a Buddhist scholar at a nearby university. At this same professor's home, on several occasions I met a writer of popular books on Zen Buddhism. I listened in rapt attention as these learned men talked at great length about Buddhism. Yet no mention of practice of any kind was ever made.

It must have been about this time that

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I began to feel a subtle pride in knowing first-hand what these authorities apparently knew only in theory. I began to think of myself as someone who had had an experience of enlightenment and was therefore secretly special. Like one with an old sickness that had lain dormant for many years, I developed a new kind of egotism more pernicious than ever before because it was accompanied by a sense of possessing special and superior knowledge.

My college career, which had been interrupted so many times by the need to work, by wartime and the demands of family life, was finally completed at a Southern California college. In a psychology department of good academic standing in those years, for a student to make a serious study of any aspect of religious or mystical experience was not

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acceptable. The closest I came to doing so was to write several papers referring to the extensive literature on authentic religious experiences from all times and places. Once or twice, I pointed out such accounts in the works of William James to a psychologist or psychiatrist on the teaching staff. The reaction was invariably to label them as "psychotic episodes" or "regressions in the service of the ego." Finally, I became interested in a subject which seemed related to the opening of inner vision, that is, to changes in perception during states of deep relaxation, since one of the clearest recollections from my own experience was of the wonderful release of all feeling of tension.

At graduation time, the head of the psychology department encouraged me to go on to graduate school at a nearby

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university to develop this interest in the course of studying for a Ph.D. This I did, and for the next few years I became immersed in a high-pressure, graduate school machine. The compulsion to be scientific seemed to narrow and constrict everyone's perspective, leading us all to an obsessive concern with counting and measuring. No orthodox church was ever more rigidly doctrinaire.

The necessity to regurgitate quantities of busy work to earn good grades made original work virtually impossible. In over twenty graduate courses I made what seemed to the faculty to be an impressive record of A grades for what seemed to me to be a mediocre quality of performance. Since no one shared my unconventional interest in the effect of deep relaxation on perception, the only way to pursue this interest was on my

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own. This I did, also studying during these years physics, biology, mathematics, and western philosophy as well as working actively as a psychologist in several clinics. As an adjunct to my training, I underwent an orthodox psychoanalysis.

The clinical psychology students were essentially oriented toward escaping from this situation at the earliest moment, with a union-card diploma and a portfolio of formulas to apply to future patients. As for those unfortunate and troubled people, the patients on whom we practiced at the University clinic, however exhaustively we tested them, somehow they belonged in none of our categories. How often I wondered if the more psychotic of these patients might not only have lost their way in searching

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for a deeper, truer perception of Reality than that perceived by a possibly mis-educated therapist.

I became increasingly of two minds about all this: on the one hand, stimulated by the university atmosphere, on the other, disturbed by a sense of wandering further and further off course. To the extent that I had become academically successful, I had become in a deeper sense unwise, unintelligent, unfree and unloving.

This busy life was suddenly interrupted by the necessity for some major surgery and a prolonged convalescence. Lying quietly alone, I realized I had lost my way in the midst of all this diversity. All the knowledge I had accumulated in these years could not be compared to that which I had learned

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in one measureless moment long before. Every formal subject led to the same abyss.

So a decision was made, and against the advice of every interested faculty member I terminated my studies for a lesser degree, a masters, and returned to a quieter and more ordinary life. Now I spent more time with my family, read and wrote poetry, helped my husband when needed with business, and worked occasionally as a volunteer in the community.

But in those intellectually busy years I had built no inner bulwark against a deep despair I often began to feel in the early '60s. I grieved that the priceless opportunity I had been given in my youth somehow had been dissipated and wasted. All my efforts to communicate what seemed most important

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to me had failed. Never once had I found the way to pass it on directly to anyone else, not even to my family. There seemed to be no one to whom I could even speak of this. I longed for guidance at once religious and practical. I also longed to be a member of a truly religious community. When, for one reason or another, I attended one of our community's churches, all I seemed to find was an organized effort to protect and distract people from the awesome struggle and dangers of transformation.

Over a period of several years, during many long nights, I lived with that profound sense of abandonment called by John of the Cross the "dark night of the soul." On the surface my life looked successful enough. But I felt I had failed on the deepest level in failing to live every day in joyful awareness, a source

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of tender patience and calm strength to my family and to others.

My only hope lay in my confidence that what was lost was here all the time and beyond time, nearer than I knew. I realized finally that to continue to indulge in regret was also a subtle form of egotism. The enemy was this very suffering, separate self. Just as I had done years before, I began to sit alone in quiet concentration. But my life was a busier one, more preoccupied with family duties. I sat less intensively and more intermittently than in my youth. For some time I sat occasionally alone. Later, learning of a group of people who sat regularly together in meditation, I joined them.

Then about two years ago I heard that a Zen center had been started by a small group in Los Angeles. So at last I came

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to zazen and to the heart of the matter. Sitting in the zendo, listening to Maezumi Roshi read from the ancient texts, I felt my exile was over. I had returned home at last.

I now know that to have had, in any measure, an enlightenment experience is only a beginning. Even to speak of having had it is to risk losing it. Immediacy is surely everything.

To be re-enlightened at every moment, forever, requires eternal vigilance. How can it be otherwise? To continue to practice such awareness at every moment is implicit to the very nature of enlightenment. Thus practice is Reality, Reality—practice. This was the indispensable pillar that had been missing from my life.

Now, like a slowly rising tide, quietly, less dramatically, the timeless vision

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returns, the infinite possibilities for joyful awareness open at every moment.

To this I now vow to give all my attention.

IV

AFTERWORD



THE SITTER IN THE FOREST

MY QUEST FOR REALITY began a little over fifty years ago with a vision of a great whirling spiral of light. Only recently have I realized how deeply that vision affected the course of my life right up to this moment.

I began to understand that vision twenty-five years after it happened, when I met the Zen master Hakuun Yasutani Roshi. I knew at once that he was unlike anyone I had ever seen before. The best way to describe him is to say that he was transparent. He was also an undistinguished-looking old fellow with flap ears who lived simply, wore an old black tam-o-shanter, and loved marshmallows.

In his introduction written sixteen years ago, Yasutani Roshi wrote: "Our

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Buddha nature has the great function by which illumination is deepened endlessly through practice."

Practice? To Western ears, practice suggests movement, action. In the ensuing years I have come to believe that what he meant is the practice of an absence, especially an absence of movement in the most primary, immediate and perceptual sense.

At that same time, Yasutani Roshi also recommended that *Shikan Taza*, a form of Zen meditation, should be my practice. He went on to say, "Shikan Taza is like sitting in the center of a clearing in the forest, knowing that ultimate danger is about to strike but not knowing what form it will take or from what direction it will come."

Let us look intently at Yasutani Roshi's description of *Shikan Taza*. We

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have gone to the forest to sit, presumably to get away from the distractions of the busy everyday world and into a place conducive to quiet meditation. Instead of the usual description of deep calm and peace, however, he describes a situation of life-threatening danger. One might well imagine that this would be the last way to describe an ideal state of meditation. Yet the Roshi used this state as metaphor for the highest mode of zazen—the practice of enlightenment itself.

I believe he did this because, at the moment of ultimate danger, the tension between peak alertness and profound stillness is stretched to its taut limit. As you sit quietly reading, take a moment to imagine that a shocking sound, totally unexpected and dangerously out of place, is suddenly heard nearby, you are

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not sure from where. Instantly you come to a peak of alertness, at the same time becoming wholly stilt scarcely breathing, barely expending an extra iota of energy. You are ready to act instantly. Ten minutes of this intense awareness can be exhausting, combining the absolute height of tension with the deepest inward stillness, creating the near-perfect set of conditions that may open us to Enlightenment.

Now feel yourself to be the sitter in the forest. If your eyes shift even momentarily to the left, danger may strike from the right. Even a flick of the eye may divert your full attention. You are not stirring a muscle. Your bodily tension is at once deeply quiet and relaxed and at the same time in a state of balanced, alert order. With virtually no energy dissipated in movement, it is

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maximally available to perception. With even the smallest movements of eye and voice stilled, there is no support for thought, no inner dialogue. All inner noise has quieted. Attention, neither narrowed and object-directed, diffuse as in sleep, nor distracted by internal noise, is now liberated to seek its true center within and to open without. The field of perception has become maximally open and receptive to Being. In this unmoving pool of perceptual clarity, every event carries primary information and is perfectly processed. In this state of near-perfect order, the most unexpected and unpredictable events are accommodated and integrated to the fullest.

I believe it is right here that the measureless moment of enlightenment comes, if it is to come at all, when atten-

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tion telescopes to point zero at the center and simultaneously opens to infinity at the periphery. Yet neither center nor periphery remains. As the fourteenth century Tibetan, Longchempa, wrote: "One may well burst out in laughter!"

At this moment there occurs a 180° turn in the center of Being, bringing with it an instant shift of perspective from within finite, partial form to the infinite ground of Consciousness itself, in which all things may be seen to unfold with uncomparable clarity. I believe this simultaneously two-sided nature of perception to be the linch pin of the enlightenment experience.

Yet what D. T. Suzuki called "the most startling event that can happen in consciousness" is only a beginning. Grandiose descriptions of enlightenment tend to obscure the fact that once this

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Way of Seeing becomes the natural matrix of everyday experience, its practice is a rather homely affair, requiring a continuous, intimate attention and discipline. Once having learned to be generally quiet and deeply relaxed, then slowly, gently, and without effort, one may learn to release any random, infinitesimal movements of the eyes or throat into a stillness so deep that no eyes, no larynx, seem to be there at all. They have been replaced by total emptiness. Gradually perception sharpens and clarifies. At some point we may realize how incessant our inner noise and chatter had become. All forms of perception begin to acquire the clarity of the plop of the frog jumping into the quiet pond in the Japanese poet Bassho's haiku. Every moment of attention, however seemingly trivial, opens to infinity as the

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perceptual field becomes ever more articulated and clear, without limit.

So ever present that we seldom recognize it, this primary mode of perception is available to each of us at every waking moment. We can experience it by doing nothing more special than *not* doing what we spend the better part of our lives doing. We have only to sit quietly, breathing naturally, becoming aware of small eye jumps and subvocal dialogue by letting them quiet down. Neither tracking nor following anything, we then open the field of perception to whatever occurs, neither clinging to what has just passed nor anticipating the next event. A bird may fly across the field, a child call, a car start—that's all, no more. All the principles of Zen practice are embodied in this radically simple attention.

In noiseless silence like this, real prac-

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tice begins. Deep, fully alert silence is the most whaling and holy of states. It is the fallow field in which the seeds of enlightenment flourish. There is literally nothing that cannot be done, and done better, within its nurturing embrace.

I now feel quite sure that when eyes and voice are stilled one cannot perceive from an egoic perspective. The separate self is a boundary phenomenon, largely embedded in speech and thought. When these subside, the ego gives up its dominance and sinks into a subsidiary role. I believe that, undramatic as this may be, it is the source of the "experience of no self" that is so vividly described throughout the literature of mysticism. So long as we remain an "I" who mediates, or an "I" who aspires to enlightenment, we remain trapped in the age-old contradiction.

With the ego absorbed in this imme-

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diate and intimate attention moment to moment, there is no separate experience of enlightenment, no path, no chasm to be bridged. No longer living in the old way, we are lived. Nothing has been lost. All our skills, strategies, relationships, and memories are available for service to a more harmonious mode of being. Far from becoming special, we become more down-to-earth, direct, natural. We become as little children with everything we have learned since in our pocket. All the energy we previously expended in support of our separate selves is now free to flow in the Tao of working, dancing, laughing, sleeping, just living.

To find the Self is to lose the self
And to be enlightened by all things.
Dogen Zengi, *The Shobogenzo*

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